



## GROWTH MANAGEMENT QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

### Public participation

*Question:* Who makes growth management decisions?

**Answer:** Land use decisions are made locally by elected local officials after consideration of public comment. The Growth Management Act (GMA) requires “early and continuous public involvement” in the planning process. No plan or ordinances can be adopted without public notice and hearings.

Many local governments in the state have undertaken extensive public participation that has allowed elected officials to achieve local goals in growth management. Pacific, King, Thurston, Clark, Spokane, Pierce, Chelan, Kitsap, and Douglas counties and the cities of Seattle, Tacoma, Spokane, Redmond, Kirkland, Mercer Island, Renton, Vancouver, Kent, Mill Creek, Everett, Shelton, and Olympia are among them.

### The need for growth management

*Question:* Why is growth management needed in Washington?

**Answer:** Prior to the passage of the GMA in 1990, planning efforts were incremental and often failed to address problems of regional scope.

The regulatory tools used by the GMA are not new, but the coordinated approach to planning is. While local governments retain decision-making power in land use planning, the state now provides planning goals, makes planning mandatory for large and fast growing local jurisdictions, requires planning on a regional basis for specified issues, and provides oversight to make sure the goals of the GMA are met.

Also new is the requirement that a jurisdiction’s comprehensive plans and development regulations need to be consistent. In addition, one jurisdiction’s plans and regulations can’t prohibit something in another local government’s plans and regulations.

## **The local-state balance**

*Question: How does the Growth Management Act work?*

**Answer:** Washington's GMA was crafted to strike a balance between local control and the need for some consistency in planning. The act requires some, and encourages other, Washington counties and cities to plan for growth that is expected to increase to about 1.5 million people by 2020.

Of the 29 counties planning under the GMA, 18 were required to plan and 11 have chosen to do so. These 29 counties have a full set of GMA planning requirements, including preparing comprehensive plans and development regulations. Ten other counties are planning for natural resource lands and critical areas only.

The GMA protects local autonomy by requiring that specific decisions be made at the local level, such as how to protect critical areas and where to draw urban boundaries. Jurisdictions are using a variety of approaches to tackle land use decisions.

Unlike growth management efforts in some other states, which require state approval of plans and regulations, Washington law presumes that local plans and regulations are valid upon adoption. (An exception is the transportation chapter of the comprehensive plan, which is certified by a regional transportation planning organization.) However, the state, other local governments, and certain individuals can petition one of three regional growth management hearings boards if they think a local action does not meet growth management requirements.

Local communities may amend local plans and regulations to accommodate new conditions. Plans may be amended no more than once a year to ensure proposed amendments are reviewed comprehensively. Every seven years, cities and counties review their growth management work to determine if it complies with the GMA; revisions are made, if needed.

## **Growth management in Washington**

*Question: How is the Growth Management Act working in Washington state?*

**Answer:** One of the goals of the GMA is to encourage development in urban areas where adequate public facilities and services exist or can be provided in an efficient manner. Since 1990 when the GMA was passed, development patterns have changed in the state. Urban sprawl is being reduced, and the pattern of growth is clearly changing. Neighborhoods are beginning to see significant amounts of infill development; thousands of units are being built, including in downtowns and town centers. The changes are being seen in communities of all sizes. In addition to individual buildings, entire neighborhoods are emerging.

Under GMA planning, residential density is increasing in six of the state's fastest growing counties. The Buildable Lands Program, created in 1997, is a review and evaluation program aimed at determining if these counties have enough residential, commercial, and industrial land to meet growth needs. The first county reports under the program show the following dwelling units per acre in urban growth areas: Clark 6, King 7.3, Pierce 4.02, Thurston 3.59, Kitsap, 3.87, and Snohomish 8.89. In Pierce County, residential densities have increased from under two to more than four units per acre from 1995-2000. Density trends in urban King County show a significant movement toward greater residential density.

In the Puget Sound region, new growth is happening in and near designated urban centers within cities, slowing the rate of urban sprawl into nearby rural areas. From 1995 to 2000, 87 percent of population growth and 96 percent of job growth occurred inside UGAs, according to the Puget Sound Regional Council.

In King County, land development in urban areas is increasing, while such development in rural areas is declining, according to the *2002 King County Benchmark Report*. The county is nearing its goal of 25 percent of growth occurring in urban centers.

Economic development is another GMA goal. Many communities are using growth management planning to help achieve economic development. The City of Cheney decided to use GMA capital facilities planning to provide infrastructure to get ready for new businesses. As a result, Cheney has been able to bring more than 900 new jobs to the community.

Progress is being made in environmental protection as well. Many communities are working on updating their critical areas ordinances for environmentally sensitive areas such as wetlands.

Communities also are taking important steps in achieving other growth management goals, including citizen participation, historic preservation, transportation, affordable housing, and timely permitting. Contact the Washington Department of Community, Trade and Economic Development (CTED), Growth Management Services, at 725-3000 for examples.

### **Urban growth areas**

*Question:*     *How do urban growth areas work?*

**Answer:**     Urban growth areas (UGAs) are areas designated by a county, with input from towns and cities, where urban development is to occur. UGAs are one of the major GMA tools provided for deciding where urban development should be encouraged and where it should end. UGAs are areas where growth and higher densities are expected and can be supported by urban services. They are usually located adjacent to a city or town.

By directing growth into urban areas, natural resource lands – such as farms and forests – can be conserved and the character of rural lands can be maintained.

Under the GMA buildable lands requirements, Clark, King, Kitsap, Pierce, Snohomish, and Thurston counties have analyzed whether UGAs for the counties have adequate development space for residential, commercial, and industrial land uses. All six counties report that their overall UGAs have adequate capacity to meet growth demands as indicated in their adopted comprehensive plans.

## **Rural areas**

*Question:* What are the benefits of the GMA for rural areas?

**Answer:** The GMA empowers all communities to define a vision and a plan for making that vision real. Rural communities have powerful and vital visions – people who choose to live in rural areas do so for good reason. Rural communities are faced with real social and economic challenges that can be addressed through meaningful planning.

When counties began GMA planning for rural areas, they struggled with what to do about existing areas of development in light of the need to prevent further sprawl and protect the remaining rural character. In 1997, the GMA was amended to provide new tools to protect rural areas and to figure out what to do about existing development that would be in keeping with rural character. One tool allows counties to designate “limited areas of more intense rural development” to recognize existing areas or existing uses. Infill development or redevelopment may be provided for within these areas.

## **Economic development**

*Question:* What is the link between growth management and economic development?

**Answer:** Growth management can help Washington’s economy. Many rural counties choosing to plan under the act did so because they wanted to attract businesses to their areas.

Including an economic development strategy in a local comprehensive plan helps to achieve a community’s vision through land use decisions. When a community makes plans on how businesses, industries, houses for workers, streets, and other services are interrelated, it can direct growth in a positive way.

Although economic development chapters were not required until 2002, more than half of local governments required to prepare comprehensive plans have included these chapters in their plans. Grant, Spokane, Benton, Chelan, Clark, and Snohomish counties and the cities of La Conner, Bellevue, Seattle, Spokane, Lakewood, Tacoma, Kirkland, Wenatchee, Vancouver, Connell, Port Townsend, Kent, Shoreline, Anacortes, and Richland are among them.

Many communities are using growth management planning to revitalize their downtowns and increase employment opportunities in the central business district. Examples are Colville, Redmond, Port Townsend, Tacoma, Spokane, Wenatchee, Walla Walla, Olympia, Kirkland, and Bellevue.

Most communities have examined industrial zoning needs and designated lands for future development. Among them are Douglas, King, Yakima, Whatcom, Lewis, Jefferson, and Pierce counties and the cities of Sultan, Tumwater, Camas, Everett, Tukwila, Seattle, and Anacortes.

Another way growth management fosters economic development is by offering greater certainty and predictability to businesses, public agencies, and local communities. By clarifying issues and concerns “up front” rather than at the end of the development process and by providing improved information and inventories of critical areas, the GMA allows business people to make better choices, avoid protracted debates, and prevent costly delays.

Developers are benefitting from GMA planning. Local governments are offering permit systems with timeframes so developers will know what permits are required and when they will be able to obtain them.

Developers working with the City of Mill Creek appreciate the greater certainty that the city’s neighborhood planning and permitting processes offer. The neighborhood plan for the area next to the Town Center gives a specific set of rules, said Michael Levy, president of Lozier Homes Inc. “We prefer to work under more defined guidelines. It’s better to know up front what the requirements are. It gives more certainty.... Time is money.”

A study sponsored by CTED found that nine of 15 local governments integrating growth management and environmental review have produced more than \$500 million in new investment in their communities. Another \$1.756 billion in investment was strongly influenced by local planning decisions through this integration process. In addition, both the local agencies and developers utilizing these new planning tools avoided more than \$1.3 million in direct environmental costs.

### **Affordable housing**

*Question: What are local governments doing about affordable housing in their GMA planning?*

**Answer:** Under the GMA, local governments are to provide housing for all economic segments of the community. As communities develop plans and regulations, they can create affordable housing opportunities because higher density development and efficient use of existing infrastructure in UGAs are being examined. Urban condominiums, townhouses, duplexes, and clustered detached housing – encouraged by growth management – are contributing to affordable housing.

In rural areas, growth management planning allows communities to examine the existing housing stock and plan for community needs. Alternative single-family housing, such as mobile and modular houses, are helping keep housing costs down.

Some people contend growth management planning is causing the price of housing to go up. Affordable housing has long been an issue in this state, with or without the GMA. Many factors contribute to increased housing prices. A growing economy, larger homes on bigger lots, smaller family sizes, and increased lumber prices are among them.

Concern also has been expressed that growth management could adversely affect land and housing markets and lead to problems of housing affordability. A study by the Brookings Institute, *The Link Between Growth Management and Housing Affordability: The Academic Evidence*, finds that market demand, not land constraints, is the primary determinant of housing prices.

### **Critical areas**

*Question:*     *How does growth management help provide for the protection of critical areas?*

To meet GMA critical areas requirements, all counties and cities in the state have been working since 1990 to establish protection for designated fish and wildlife habitat areas, wetlands, geologically hazardous areas, aquifer recharge areas, and frequently flooded areas.

Critical areas protection was to be completed before comprehensive plans to ensure these specially sensitive areas would (a) be designated so more intense development could occur elsewhere and (b) be protected from incompatible development while comprehensive plans and development regulations were being adopted.

In 1995, the GMA was amended to require counties and cities to include the best available science in developing policies and development regulations to protect the functions and values of critical areas. In addition, counties and cities are required to give special consideration to conservation and protection measures necessary to preserve or enhance anadromous fisheries.

Many local governments are reviewing their critical areas ordinances as part of their GMA Updates and determining how to incorporate the best available science.

Some examples of critical area ordinances that have good provisions are Clark, Douglas, Clallam, and Chelan counties and the cities of Rockford, Cashmere, Kalama, Edgewood, Index, Longview, Cheney, and Mulkieto.

## Resource lands

*Question: What techniques are being used to help keep resource lands in production?*

The GMA requires that natural resource lands of long-term commercial significance be identified and conserved. All counties in the state with farm, forest, and mineral lands have now designated resource lands. In addition, the 29 counties required to conserve them have developed policies to help keep them viable.

For example, Franklin County has designated 645,000 acres of agricultural lands. Agriculture is important to the county's economy. "The Growth Management Act is a very powerful tool, and provides Franklin County with mechanisms necessary to make sure that we protect the region's most important and viable economic industry – agriculture," said Jerrod MacPherson, planning and building director for the county.

In Grant County, 1,264,281 acres of land are designated as agricultural lands. County Commissioner Deborah Moore, who has farmed in the county for more than 22 years, said that agriculture is the county's lifeblood. "Grant County is agriculture.... We need to do what we can to protect agriculture and the agricultural industry. Designating agricultural lands is part of that."

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